



Overstone, Overstone 1953

Overstone School, near Northampton; drawn by J. Porteous Wood.

**GIRLS' SCHOOLS OF
THE MIDLANDS—XVIII**

**OVERSTONE SCHOOL,
NEAR NORTHAMPTON**

'One of the Last Refuges of Humanism'

By ROSEMARY MEYNELL

OVERSTONE, a fine estate which lies in the heart of England not far from Northampton, and less than twenty-five miles away from the great boys' public schools of Rugby, Stowe, Oundle, and Uppingham was chosen in 1929, to be the first P.N.E.U. Girls' Public School. The methods of the Parents' National Education Union had been evolved in the eighteen eighties by Miss Charlotte Mason, a pioneer educator who was far ahead of her time.

It was her belief that every child needs an abundance of knowledge for the mind and that that knowledge should be varied.

Education, she wrote, "is not an atmosphere, a discipline, a life" and in all her books about teaching she emphasized that education is the science of human relations, and that humanism always is shown in the personality of the child. Her methods came as a revelation to the sturdy and conventional Victorian mothers who, in 1890, the Parents' Union itself was formed and held its first meeting. The following year the correspondence and the start which came to the day enabling her to visit the country and to meet other children at

pace. Many of Charlotte Mason's ideas are now generally accepted by educationalists, but the P.N.E.U. still retains the individuality which she gave it from the beginning. Long before psychology really influenced education Miss Mason taught her students that a child's nature can be made or marred in the very earliest years—“Our students must learn to produce a human being at birth, mentally, morally, and spiritually,” she wrote. And a student of hers at Ambleside remarked that she had come to learn to teach was told that “not just to learn to live.” We “are educated by our own intuitions,” a pronouncement which may have seemed strangely variance with the rigid Victorian orthodoxy of the day.

Charlotte Mason died in 1923, and in 1924 Miss Mason's ideas were adopted by the P.N.E.U.

painter is studied by means of folders of coloured reproductions made by the Medici Society especially for P.N.E.U. Sewing and dressmaking receive every encouragement and each term there is a dress parade down the great staircase in the hall. Arts is given special prominence and, in addition to the usual handicrafts girls can learn book binding and basket work. Music is regarded as important and in its early days Overstone was visited by Gustav Holst, who took a great interest in the progress of the artistic students. Charlotte Mason herself was a great believer in nature study, and nature note-books in which “finds” of every season are recorded and signed in the master of White's signature. Books are read by all the girls together with “century books” which give a sense of the continuity of history and the relationship between one social or political development and another. Overstone is also a school where P.N.E.U. members maintain that time can be found for all these “extras” because the method itself gives time. There are no marks given and no remarks or corrections made on the written work and no prizes compelled for children are taught to work for the love of knowledge.

CHARLOTTE MASON
1822-1923, author of
“Home Education” and
“The Story of the World”

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and to find an education for their children that is really wide have given it their support.

AT the start Miss Mason's methods were confined to home schoolrooms; then, as her philosophical works on education came to be more widely known, schools were started by qualified P.N.E.U. teachers. In a sense Charlotte Mason was a visionary, and just as Florence Nightingale taught that nursing must be a vocation, she made it clear that the training and teaching of children should be regarded as a service for God. From its inception P.N.E.U. has been undenominational, as Overstone is to-day, but the training given lays great emphasis on character building and the personality of the individual. Pupils are encouraged to work for the love of knowledge and though the curriculum is very wide it does in fact give scope for the late developers, and the less responsive, to follow at their own

pace. Miss Mason had benefited from P.N.E.U. and who herself became one of the pivots of the movement, which sought always to unite the interests and aims of parents and teachers. The building, a fine Victorian Renaissance mansion, is ideal for a school, standing as it does in some of the loveliest country in the Midlands. It was decided that there should be a principal as well as a headmistress and Mrs. D. L. Esslemont came to found the School with Miss Helen Wix, who gave up an appointment as an Inspector of Schools in order to become Overstone's first head-mistress. There were only fourteen girls the first term, but within two years the numbers had risen to over one hundred. It was never intended that the school should grow too big, and to-day there are more than 140 girls between the ages of eleven and eighteen. The house, with its fine library, beautiful inlaid parquet floors, and its view of the terraced gardens, the swimming pool and the park and lake beyond, still retains the atmosphere of a private house and a

public library, but it takes a pride in the largest library of Girls are happily married "grandchildren" are already appearing in the school. Since 1948, by arrangement with the local authority, two children from Northamptonshire secondary schools come each year to Overstone at the expense of the authority. This interesting innovation has worked well and happily and is in every way a success.

THE fact that P.N.E.U. education is "such fun" from a child's point of view led many people to think that it was intended only for those who would not have to earn their own living, but the school's academic record gives the lie to this. All the girls sit for the General Certificate of Education and the majority offer seven subjects. Room is found on the time-table for unusual subjects: Picture Study, for example, is taught throughout the school and each term a new

available twice a week and current films frequently. A visiting speaker supplements the Mrs. talks which are a feature of every form's instruction.

But in recalling Overstone, the thoughts of the Old Girls return always to the beauty of the place, and the special atmosphere of the school. Miss Plumptre, who succeeded Mrs. Esslemont and Miss Wix in 1947 as head, has been associated with the school for many years, and it has lost nothing of the originality that was its hall-mark in the early days. The strength of the school, and indeed of P.N.E.U. to-day, lies in the widespread nature of its membership and the responsiveness of each new generation to its methods. People send their girls to Overstone because of personal recommendations or because they are seeking a chance for their daughters to receive a really wide education in a school that was once described by an enthusiastic supporter as "one of the last refuges of humanism."

A7/1955

Learning with Mother



First chore is at 7 a.m. Barbara, thirteen, milks Fatty, the cow; Timothy, seven, feeds Browne. Barbara also makes butter and cheese



After taking early tea to his parents, Timothy makes breakfast at 7.30. All the Lewis children were taught to cook by their mother

PHOTOS BY JOHN R. SIMHONS



Mother's school begins at nine with art. The children are framing Millet reproductions for their rooms. Right: sums in the kitchen as Mrs. Lewis prepares lunch

MRS. EILEEN LEWIS HAS SIX CHILDREN AND HAS EDUCATED THEM ALL HERSELF

A MINISTRY of Education representative called on Eileen Lewis, wife of the rector of Taynton, near Gloucester, to inquire why her children were not attending school. She replied that she was teaching them herself. The representative examined the children, and reported that he was satisfied with their standard of education.

Eileen Lewis, who is in her early forties, has taught her six children for the past eleven years, using a correspondence course of home studies from the Parents' Union School in Ambleside, Westmorland. The Lewis children wear brown, sky-blue and white mufferls, with a badge of a skylark and the motto: "I am, I can, I ought, I will." They are enrolled members of the biggest school in the world, whose pupils receive lessons in places as diverse as Mauritius, Aden, Madagascar, Cochin China and the Leeward Islands.

Many state and private schools use the system in Britain, where it is recognized by the Board of Education, and there are P.U.S. affiliated schools in Australia, Pakistan, Portugal, South Africa, Kenya, Argentina and in Washington, America, where an English teacher has recently opened one for British children. Says Helena Haughton, general secretary of the Parents' National Educational Union, the controlling body: "So long as there is a parent or teacher to explain the lessons, any child anywhere can be enrolled."

No training as a teacher

Eileen Lewis first thought of teaching her children at home when she read *Home Education*, a book by Charlotte Mason, first published in 1851. She agreed with the author, who believed that a child learns best where it is happiest—at home. But, as a housewife with no previous training as a teacher, she did not think herself competent enough to undertake the education of her children. Then she heard of P.U.S., with its regular terms, holidays, reports, timetables and examinations. "The correspondence lessons made teaching extremely simple," she says.

The P.U.S. method is substantially the same as that advocated by Charlotte Mason, who abhorred "potted" forms of learning, from books on books. Instead, P.U.S. pupils go into the fields and woods for nature study; they read travel books to learn geography, and biographies to learn history.

One day recently Mrs. Lewis talked about the French painter, Millet, while her only daughter, Barbara, and her youngest son, Timothy, framed those of his pictures they liked best. The arithmetic lesson was





A "live" history lesson in church which dates from Cromwell. The hour-glass was used by the seventeenth-century rector to time his sermon



Chess is part of the home education and all the Lewis children were given a set at the age of three. Timothy plays Barbara on a portable board

moved from the schoolroom to the kitchen, so that their mother could prepare lunch at the same time. Timothy learnt about weights and measures by weighing out ingredients, and Barbara entered up the household account books.

When the hotpot was in the oven, the "class" went to the village church for a lesson in Commonwealth history, which they got from being shown evidence of Cromwell's vandalism. By lunchtime, at one o'clock, lessons were finished for the day; work had begun punctually at nine. "I don't insist on prep, as there isn't any need for it," says Eileen Lewis.

Besides the "three Rs," her children are taught to cook, trap rabbits for the pot, grow their own flowers and vegetables, make butter and cheese, produce honey, knit, weave, sew and do their own redecoration and repairs to the seven-bedroomed rectory.

The cost—£10 a year

Though an entire education by P.U.S. methods can be completed at home, the Lewis children transfer to the local grammar school at thirteen; Robin, the eldest, has passed his General Education Certificate and is now reading mathematics for Cambridge. He represents his county at chess, and plays the piano, organ, clarinet, oboe and flute, all of which were taught him by his mother.

A P.U.S. education costs about £10 a year, including the books for each child. But the children are not the only ones to have benefited from it in the Lewis household. Says their father: "Until my wife started the system I knew nothing about literature. But I have now read most of the classics."

CECILIE LESLIE HARTLEY



Family choir. From left: Robin, seventeen; Timothy; Barbara; Mrs. Lewis; Peter, nine; Phillip, twelve; Henry, fourteen; the Rev. E. Lewis



Extra subject—running repairs. Peter fits a new pane into the greenhouse roof. He and his brother, Phillip, grow all the vegetables for the family

Henry teaches Barbara to weave. Mrs. Lewis has cut and tailored suits for her husband and sons out of tweed Henry has made on his loom



THE P.N.E.U. METHOD OF READING AND NARRATION

MANY COMPLAINTS are voiced about the 'modern child'. We say that his ability to express himself in his own language is extremely limited, that he rarely listens properly to the simplest instructions—that he appears, in fact, to have lost the ability to concentrate.

Now there's no good blaming all this on television or comics. Children have to be trained to approach their work intelligently, and it's up to us to train them. If such training does not begin in the most junior classes, the task of instilling it into older pupils is both formidable for the teacher and hard for the taught. From the age of six onwards children can be trained systematically not only to listen, but to repeat lucidly what they have heard, and so gradually take part in sensible discussion on the subject studied.

It was Charlotte Mason who, during the latter part of the last century, first realised the importance of oral training for young children. But she went further. She embodied her ideals in a definite method; one that today is known as the P.N.E.U. method. The letters stand for Parents National Educational Union, because Charlotte Mason's original planning was for use in the Home Schoolroom, and today many parents throughout the world still rely on this way of educating their children.

Nevertheless, P.N.E.U. schools soon developed, schools in which all the ideals of Charlotte Mason were put into practice. These, of course, cover every aspect of child education, but there is one part which is particularly relevant here—that is the method of reading and narration, which can be used by any teacher in any school.

This method is really quite simple. Where very small children are concerned, it will be the teacher who does the reading. Before he or she does so, however, there should be some recapitulation of the portion read in a previous lesson, followed by a few introductory remarks on the matter next to be read. These remarks must direct the children's thoughts towards the subject, without spoiling things for them by telling too much.

Supposing, for example, the chapter of *Alice in Wonderland* about the tea-party were to be read. The teacher would first ask the children what they remembered about the Cheshire Cat, who is the central figure of the preceding chapter. One child would then tell what he knew and another child or two would supplement where memory failed.

This only takes a few minutes—just sufficient time for the minds of the class to be clearly focused on the matter in hand. Then the teacher can remind them that it was the Cat who told Alice about the March Hare and the Hatter, and that now she has decided to call at the house of the March Hare. It could also be added that, oddly enough, Alice finds the Hatter at the Hare's house too, and that another visitor is there as well.

This should be enough to prepare the class to listen with interest and anticipation while the teacher reads about half the chapter aloud. Then follows the narration. Children love this, and as nobody knows who will be asked to 'tell back' first, all will have listened to the reading with the greatest attention. The child chosen stands up and repeat the story clearly, in his own words—though it will be noted that gradually more and more vocabulary is assimilated from the books read.

If the first child 'sticks', the teacher may prompt him or ask another to go on. After that, any details which have been omitted from the main narration can be filled in by other members of the class.

The same process is then followed for the second half of the chapter, and the lesson can be concluded in various ways, which will include some class discussion. In this case they might recite and write down the more usual version of 'Twinkle, twinkle,' or make up sentences using 'lesson' and 'lesson'.

This method of reading and narration is of course applicable to subjects other than English. It has been found that in Scripture, History and Geography, through such careful concentration during the reading, followed by accurate re-expression, a real and lasting knowledge is obtained which requires little or no revision at the end of term.

As soon as possible the children do the reading aloud themselves. This necessitates class copies instead of one book for the master or mistress. Charlotte Mason was ahead of her time in insisting on this, but nowadays the advantages of such a use of books are widely recognised.

For older children, too, a written account of the matter read can occasionally be substituted for the oral narration. Using good text books whose style is unconsciously adopted, pupils soon learn the art of correct and fluent reportage.

Children trained by this method of reading and narration develop outstanding characteristics: first, the ability to concentrate; second, to sift the subject matter and recognise salient points; third, to read clearly, speak with confidence and discuss intelligently; fourth, to write plain straightforward English. Nothing but good could come from an extensive use of this P.N.E.U. method throughout the junior classes of every school.

G. H. PHILLIPS.

FOR CONSULTATION

Charlotte Mason—'An Essay towards a Philosophy of Education', 'Home Education', 'Home and School Education'.

A short synopsis of the matter contained in these books, as well as many other books and any information required, may be obtained from: The P.N.E.U. Office, Murray House, Vandon Street, London, S.W.1.

(CUT. 1946)
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